

Ida Tarbell

Ida Minerva Tarbell (November 5, 1857 – January 6, 1944) was an American teacher, author and journalist. She was one of the leading "muckrakers" of the progressive era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and is thought to have pioneered investigative journalism.^[1] She is best known for her 1904 book, *The History of the Standard Oil Company*,^[2] which was listed as No. 5 in a 1999 list by New York University of the top 100 works of 20th-century American journalism.^[3] It was first serialized in *McClure's Magazine* from 1902 to 1904. She depicted John D. Rockefeller as crabbed, miserly, money-grubbing, and viciously effective at monopolizing the oil trade. She wrote many other notable magazine series and biographies, including several works on President Abraham Lincoln, revealing his early life.


Contents

- Early life and education
- Career
- Influence on the oil industry
- Representation in other media
- Death and legacy
- Books and writings by Ida Tarbell
- References
- Further reading
- External links

Early life and education

Ida Tarbell was born in Erie County, Pennsylvania, on November 5, 1857,^[4] to Esther Ann (née McCullough) and Franklin Summer Tarbell, a teacher and a joiner by trade.^[5] She was born in the log cabin home of her maternal grandfather, Walter Raleigh McCullough, a Scots-Irish pioneer, and his wife.^[5] Her father's distant immigrant ancestors had settled in New England in the 17th century.

Ida Tarbell



Portrait taken in 1904

Born	Ida Minerva Tarbell November 5, 1857 Hatch Hollow, Amity Township, Erie County, Pennsylvania
Died	January 6, 1944 (aged 86) Bridgeport, Connecticut
Occupation	Teacher, writer and journalist
Notable works	<i>The History of the Standard Oil Company</i>

In 1860, Ida's father moved the family to Titusville, Pennsylvania, a new center of oil production. There he built a house, which was her mother's first home of her own.^[5] The Tarbell family lived in the western region of the state in the period as new oil fields were being developed in the 1860s, utterly changing the regional economy. Her father first used his trade to build wooden oil storage tanks.^[6] He later became an oil producer and refiner in Venango County. Her father's business, along with those of many other small businessmen, was adversely affected by the South Improvement Company scheme (circa 1872) between the railroads and larger oil interests. Later, Tarbell would vividly recall this event in her writing, in which she accused the leaders of the Standard Oil Company of using unfair tactics to put her father and many small oil companies out of business.^[4]

The Tarbells converted to Methodism when Ida was a child. They were socially active, entertaining prohibitionists and women's suffragists.^[7] Tarbell graduated at the head of her high school class in Titusville and went on to study biology at Allegheny College in 1876, where she was the only woman in her class of 41.^[8] As a student, she was a founding member of the local sorority that became the Mu chapter of the Kappa Alpha Theta sorority in 1876.^[9] She lived separately in a house with the few other upper class women at the college and graduated in 1880.

Career

Tarbell began her career as a teacher at Poland Union Seminary in Poland, Ohio. She taught classes in geology, botany, geometry and trigonometry as well as languages, Greek, Latin, French and German.^[10] After two years, she realized teaching was too much for her and that she enjoyed writing more. Tarbell had determined never to marry and so instead pursued a journalism career.

Tarbell returned to Pennsylvania, where she met Theodore L. Flood, editor of *The Chautauquan*, a teaching supplement for home study courses at Chautauqua, New York. She was quick to accept Flood's offer to write for the publication. She later wrote, "I was glad to be useful, for I had grown up with what was called the Chautauqua movement." In 1886 she became managing editor. Her duties included proofreading, answering reader questions, providing proper pronunciation of certain words, translating foreign phrases, identifying characters, and defining words. "Doing this job I began to think about facts and reading proofs. It was an exacting job which never ceases to worry me. What if the accent was in the wrong place? What if I brought somebody into the world in the wrong year?"^[11]

In 1890 Tarbell moved to Paris to do postgraduate work in historical research. She already wanted "to rescue women from the obscurity of history."^[8] Specifically, she intended to write a biography of Madame Roland, the leader of an influential salon during the French Revolution, and was able to make use of sources that had never been used, such as family letters. While in France, she wrote short features on prominent Frenchwomen and Parisian life for the syndicate affiliated with Samuel McClure's magazine. He offered her the position as editor for his eponymous magazine. While working for *McClure's Magazine*, Tarbell wrote a popular series on Napoleon Bonaparte.^[10]

While based in Washington, D.C., Tarbell conducted research to support her 20-part series on President Abraham Lincoln. This was highly popular, attracting enough new readers to double the magazine's circulation.^{[4][12]} The articles were collected in a book, giving Tarbell a national reputation as a major writer and the leading authority on the slain president.^[13] Her research in the backwoods of Kentucky and Illinois uncovered the true story of Lincoln's childhood and youth. As she continued to write about Lincoln, she published a series of articles and books about him and traveled on the lecture circuit, recounting her discoveries to large audiences.

In 1898, Tarbell moved to New York where *McClure's* was based. In 1902, she began publishing serialized articles in McClure's that were later collected in the book, *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904).^[4]

While Tarbell established her reputation in a field dominated by men, her articles and novels about women began to change starting in 1909. The feminism appeared to fade as she recommended that women embrace home life and the family, saying they had a "true role as wives, mothers and homemakers."^[8] She held this position until her death. Former allies among suffragists were dismayed at her change and her speaking to anti-suffragist organizations. Helen Keller described Tarbell as "getting old."^[8] Historian Robert Stinson believes that she was making new public statements about an ambiguity she had lived in her own life.^[4]

Influence on the oil industry

In 1900 Tarbell began to research the Standard Oil trust with the help of an assistant, John Siddall.^[13] Tarbell began her interviews with Henry H. Rogers, to whom she was first introduced by writer Mark Twain.^[14] Rogers had begun his career during the American Civil War in western Pennsylvania oil regions where Tarbell had grown up. In 1902 she conducted detailed interviews with the Standard Oil magnate.^[15]

Rogers, wily and normally guarded in matters related to business and finance, may have been under the impression her work was to be complimentary. He was apparently unusually forthcoming. However, Tarbell's interviews with Rogers formed the basis for her negative exposé of the business practices of industrialist John D. Rockefeller and the massive Standard Oil organization.^[15] Her investigative journalism was serialized from 1902 to 1904 in *McClure's Magazine*; her first article on Standard Oil was published with pieces by Lincoln Steffens^[12] and Ray Stannard Baker.^[10] Together these articles ushered in the era of muckraking journalism. The series was later published as a book in 1904, *The History of the Standard Oil Company*.

Tarbell's biggest obstacle, however, was neither her gender nor Rockefeller's opposition. Rather, her biggest obstacle was the craft of journalism as practiced at the turn of the twentieth century. She investigated Standard Oil and Rockefeller by using documents—hundreds of thousands of pages scattered throughout the nation—and then amplified her findings through interviews with the corporation's executives and competitors, government regulators, and academic experts past and present. In other words, she proposed to practice what today is considered investigative reporting, which did not exist in 1900. Indeed, she invented a new form of journalism.^[1]

And then, in an inspirational tale for journalists, Ida Tarbell went to work. Her *History of the Standard Oil Company* spotlighted Rockefeller's practices and mobilized the public. Readers nationwide awaited each chapter of the story, serialized in 19 installments by McClure's between 1902 and 1904.^[16]



Tarbell in 1904

Her stories on Standard Oil began in the November 1902 issue of McClure's and lasted for nineteen issues. She was meticulous in detailing Rockefeller's early interest in oil and how the industry began. After the series was over, she wrote a profile of Rockefeller, perhaps the first CEO profile ever, though she never met or even talked to him.^[4]

Tarbell developed investigative reporting techniques, digging into public documents across the country. Separately, these documents provided individual instances of Standard Oil's strong-arm tactics against rivals, railroad companies and others that got in its way. Organized by Tarbell into a cogent history, they became a damning portrayal of big business. A subhead on the cover of Weinberg's book encapsulates it this way: "How a female investigative journalist brought down the world's greatest tycoon and broke up the Standard Oil monopoly."^[17]

Tarbell's exposé of Standard Oil was the first corporate coverage of its kind, and it attacked the business operations of Rockefeller, the best-known businessman in the country at the time. He had retired from the oil business several years before, and was devoting his time to philanthropy.^[17]

Tarbell disliked the muckraker label and wrote an article, "Muckraker or Historian," in which she justified her efforts for exposing the oil trust. She referred to

this classification of muckraker, which I did not like. All the radical element, and I numbered many friends among them, were begging me to join their movements. I soon found that most of them wanted attacks. They had little interest in balanced findings. Now I was convinced that in the long run the public they were trying to stir would weary of vituperation, that if you were to secure permanent results the mind must be convinced.^[18]

Representation in other media

- Charles Klein's political play, *The Lion and the Mouse* (1905), opened soon after Tarbell's series on Standard Oil had been published in *McClure's Magazine*, and the plot was thought to be based on her campaign. (Its title is that of an Aesop's fable.) Its 686 continuous performances set a record for any American play in New York, and four road companies took the play on the road.^[8]
- Drunk History* (Season 5, Episode 6) Underdogs featured Ida Tarbell as played by Shannon Woodward

^[19]

Death and legacy

Tarbell died of pneumonia at Bridgeport Hospital in Bridgeport, Connecticut on January 6, 1944, after being in the hospital since December 1943. She was 86.^[20]

Tarbell has been well remembered in the decades since her death. In 1993, half a century later, the Ida Tarbell House in Easton, Connecticut, was declared a National Historic Landmark. In 2000 she was inducted posthumously into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York.^[21]

On September 14, 2002, the United States Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp honoring Tarbell as part of a series of four stamps honoring women journalists.^[22]

Books and writings by Ida Tarbell

- *All in the day's work : an autobiography*, 1939
- *A reporter for Lincoln; story of Henry E. Wing, soldier and newspaperman*, 1927
- *He knew Lincoln, and other Billy Brown stories*, 1922
- *Peacemakers—blessed and otherwise; observations, reflections and irritations at an international conference*, 1922
- *Boy scouts' life of Lincoln*, 1921
- *The Rising of the Tide; The Story of Sabinsport*, 1919
- *In Lincoln's Chair*, 1920
- *New Ideals in Business, An Account of Their Practice and Their Effects upon Men and Profits*, 1916
- *The Ways of Woman*, 1915
- *The Tariff in Our Times*, 1911
- *Father Abraham*, 1909
- *He Knew Lincoln*, 1907
- *Madame Roland: a biographical study* (1905/1916)
- *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, 1905/1912/1950
- *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* 1900 1903 1909 1917 1920 1924 1928
- *A Life of Napoleon Bonaparte: with a sketch of Josephine, Empress of the French*, 1901/1909/1919
- *The Early Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 1896
- *A Short Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*, 1895
- *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, 2 vols., Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1963 {1904}.
- *The Business of Being a Woman*, The Macmillan Company, 1921
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Further reading

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- Weinberg, Steve *Taking on the Trust: The Epic Battle of Ida Tarbell and John D. Rockefeller* (2008)

External links

- Works by Ida Tarbell ([https://www.gutenberg.org/author/Tarbell,+Ida+M.+\(Ida+Minerva\)\)](https://www.gutenberg.org/author/Tarbell,+Ida+M.+(Ida+Minerva))) at Project Gutenberg
- Works by or about Ida Tarbell ([https://archive.org/search.php?query=%28%28subject%3A%22Tarbell%2C%20Ida%20Minerva%22%20OR%20subject%3A%22Tarbell%2C%20Ida%20M%2E%22%20OR%20subject%3A%22Tarbell%2C%20I%22%20OR%20subject%3A%22Ida%20M%2E%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20subject%3A%22Ida%20Minerva%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20subject%3A%22Ida%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20creator%3A%22Ida%20Minerva%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20creator%3A%22Ida%20M%2E%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20creator%3A%22I%2E%20Minerva%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20creator%3A%22Tarbell%2C%20Ida%20Minerva%22%20OR%20creator%3A%22Tarbell%2C%20Ida%22%20OR%20title%3A%22Ida%20Minerva%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20title%3A%22Ida%20M%2E%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20title%3A%22I%2E%20M%2E%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20title%3A%22Ida%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20description%3A%22Ida%20Minerva%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20description%3A%22Ida%20M%2E%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20description%3A%22I%2E%20M%2E%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20description%3A%22Ida%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20description%3A%22Tarbell%2C%20Ida%20M%2E%22%20OR%20description%3A%22Ida%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20description%3A%22Tarbell%2C%20Ida%22%29%20OR%20%28%221857-1944%22%20AND%20Tarbell%29%29%20AND%20%28-mediatype:software%29\)](https://archive.org/search.php?query=%28%28subject%3A%22Tarbell%2C%20Ida%20Minerva%22%20OR%20subject%3A%22Tarbell%2C%20Ida%20M%2E%22%20OR%20subject%3A%22Tarbell%2C%20I%22%20OR%20subject%3A%22Ida%20M%2E%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20subject%3A%22Ida%20Minerva%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20subject%3A%22Ida%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20creator%3A%22Ida%20Minerva%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20creator%3A%22Ida%20M%2E%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20creator%3A%22I%2E%20Minerva%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20creator%3A%22Tarbell%2C%20Ida%20Minerva%22%20OR%20creator%3A%22Tarbell%2C%20Ida%20M%2E%22%20OR%20creator%3A%22Tarbell%2C%20Ida%22%20OR%20title%3A%22Ida%20Minerva%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20title%3A%22Ida%20M%2E%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20title%3A%22I%2E%20M%2E%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20title%3A%22Ida%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20description%3A%22Ida%20Minerva%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20description%3A%22Ida%20M%2E%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20description%3A%22I%2E%20M%2E%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20description%3A%22Ida%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20description%3A%22Tarbell%2C%20Ida%20M%2E%22%20OR%20description%3A%22Ida%20Tarbell%22%20OR%20description%3A%22Tarbell%2C%20Ida%22%29%20OR%20%28%221857-1944%22%20AND%20Tarbell%29%29%20AND%20%28-mediatype:software%29)) at Internet Archive
- Works by Ida Tarbell ([https://librivox.org/author/2695\)](https://librivox.org/author/2695)) at LibriVox (public domain audiobooks) 
- Works by Ida Tarbell (<https://openlibrary.org/authors/OL113636A>) at Open Library (<https://openlibrary.org>)
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- Harvard University Library Open Collections Program. Women Working, 1870–1930, Ida Tarbell (1857–1944) (https://web.archive.org/web/20051223010935/http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/www/people_tarbell.html). A full-text searchable online database with complete access to publications written by Ida Tarbell.
- The Ida Tarbell Home Page (<http://tarbell.allegheeny.edu/>)
- American Experience: The Rockefellers (https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rockefellers/peopleevents/p_tarbell.html)
- National Women's Hall of Fame - Ida Tarbell (<https://www.womenofthehall.org/inductee/ida-tarbell/>)
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- *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (<http://www.pagetutor.com/standard/index.html>) by Ida Tarbell
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 - The Woman Who Took on the Tycoon (<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-woman-who-took-on-the-tycoon-651396/>)
 - Ida M. Tarbell: A Progressive Look at Lincoln (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jala/2629860.0019.106/--ida-m-tarbell-a-progressive-look-at-lincoln?rgn=main;view=fulltext>)
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